Union of BC Indian Chiefs
38th Annual General Assembly

Hon. Michael de Jong
Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation

Vancouver, B.C.
Sept 22, 2006

*Check against delivery*

First let me begin by saying how honoured and privileged I feel by the invitation to appear here at the 38th Annual General Assembly.

Let me recognize the traditional territories of the Coast Salish people. It is my first opportunity relatively early in assuming this new post within the government of British Columbia to meet and speak with you.

There are generations of leaders and future leaders represented here today. Chief Stewart Phillip, president, let me say again what a great pleasure it is for me to be here and to have a chance to speak with you. Since being sworn in to the post, it's my first opportunity to meet this room full of leaders, who assume the burden and the challenges associated with representing the interests of their people. It's not an easy task. It impacts in a profound way on one's personal life. I think we all do it because we have an equally profound desire to improve the lives of the people we represent.

But that does not make us immune from things that happen in our lives. Chief, again, my condolences. This has not been an easy week for you with the passing of your mom. And no matter when or how that happens, it is a sad time. It is a testament to your commitment as a leader that you are here at your post in the immediate aftermath of a difficult time for your family. On behalf of Lorne Brownsey and staff at the Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, our condolences to you.

Chief Robert Shintah, I'm very much looking forward to having an opportunity to work together as we chart a path forward.

It is a formidable and strong team that the union has at the helm with its hand on the tiller. And if I might also recognize the presence here – either in person or in spirit – of the elders that guide us in our deliberations and remind us of our past, our individual past and our collective past. Remind us of our history and the fact that it has in many ways been a history characterized by injustice and inequality. I hope it also reminds us of the sense of urgency we need to feel about finding a path towards reconciliation. A new way, a way that will benefit the lives of the people we represent.

I am new to this post as the Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, but it is by no means a signal that the incredible events and progress that we have made together over the course of the past few years should in any way change direction. I think the presence of the word "reconciliation" is very significant in the title of the office that I now hold.

I believe that March of 2005 will be regarded in the years ahead as a seminal time, even a seminal event. The work that your leaders, in conjunction with the representatives of the First Nations Summit and BC Assembly of First Nations.... I saw Chief Shawn Atleo earlier. I had breakfast this morning with Grand Chief Ed John. I am often accused of walking around in a fog, but this morning it was actually true. This is why I was late. I apologize for that. The aircraft wasn't leaving Prince George, and this is why Grand Chief Ed John and I could have a more leisurely chat.

The work that your leadership has done to create a First Nations Leadership Council is, in my view, an achievement – the importance of which we are only now beginning to understand and see the benefits from. The creation of a Leadership Council does not mean the issues that need to tackled be will be any less difficult, that the challenges we face will be any easier to overcome, but it does mean that we will be marshalling our collective efforts in a way that we simply haven't in the past.

Chief Stewart Phillip and your executive, when I express my enthusiasm and humility, I hope that being asked to fill this post by the Premier is in part a reflection of my view that the work you have been doing is instrumental in showing results at every level. To have an opportunity to be involved and work with you, the executive and the Leadership Council is greatly exciting to me as we move forward.

I would be kidding if I told you I had not heard some questions about my arrival on the scene at this particular point in time. There's a fellow coming along I think in about an hour. You might want to ask him about the rationale for that, but I want to share with you some observations that I have made over the course of the past number of years.

I have worked with the Premier for almost 14 years now. In fact, he and I were elected to the B.C. Legislature on the same night, in two by-elections – one here in Vancouver and the other in what was then the riding of Matsqui in the Fraser Valley. His passion for wanting to work with all of you to address the historical injustice – to find a way down that path of reconciliation, to reduce and ultimately eliminate the gaps that have separated Aboriginal people, First Nations from other aspects of society in British Columbia and Canada – is deep rooted and genuine. It has been instilled in every aspect of the executive branch of the government. It is a reality; it is here to stay; and it is a top, top priority for the government.

I hope, and I know, we will speak at length about the challenges that are associated with taking that position of leadership. I tell you it exists in the mind of the Premier and the Cabinet, but we need to ensure it becomes a reality right through government. Right

down to the operational level where First Nations are dealing with forestry offices, other departments of government.

The frustration I'm sure we all feel is the challenge of making that happen more quickly, certainly sooner rather than later. And I guess we achieve that by pushing forward.

Folks, that time in March of 2005… I think we will look back and talk about the formalization of the New Relationship. What are the first words in the document? They are profound words for their simplicity. I think they will acquire a meaning in the years ahead and a significance that will rival anything that we think of in terms of legal text. *We are all here to stay.*

So let us work together to find solutions to these historical issues. Now the words are frequently, not that easy to put on paper but if they simply remain on paper then that's all they are, words. We need to make them a reality. We need to make them a reality for the people we represent. That has to be at the heart of our efforts, are the lives of people being improved.

We have as a government set some goals, some general goals. We want to be the healthiest society in North America. We want to be the most educated, literate society in North America. We want to have the highest standards of environmental stewardship. We want to lead the continent in terms of job creation and livelihood for our peoples.

We will only achieve those goals if First Nations achieve those goals. And perhaps it has taken us longer than it should have to realize that in British Columbia and I'm sorry and embarrassed about that.

All of our experiences are different. I remember as a boy arriving at a place where the First Nation lived on a reserve, not that far from another town, and seeing the physical separation, social separation, the economic separation. And we ask ourselves why that was so? What led to that? Why it hadn't been addressed? But for too long we were content to live with the status quo. You will hear from the Premier in a few moments about how that is for the government of British Columbia no longer acceptable. It's time to change.

So, the path to reconciliation is never easy and we take steps together. If they're to be successful, they must be steps that we take together. Sometimes it's difficult to take that step and sometimes when you do it's difficult to see the results because, like any road, there are potholes and issues that creep up.

But if we maintain that dialogue built around the principles espoused in the New Relationship it becomes possible to navigate through those difficulties. To navigate around those potholes, so that when an approach to something like what was then a Forest and Range Agreement, now a Forest and Range Opportunity, then the approach of the Government of British Columbia is taking is fraught with problems for First Nations. The fact that your president, your executive can now, in a spirit of forthrightness, respect,

bring those issues to the table and achieve the change that is essential for many First Nations to take that first step, we can say that we can do that.

That's what the New Relationship in part, is about. And how, like the seed you plant must grow and extend into every aspect of the Relationship, we have government to government, people to people.

The New Relationship Trust represents an opportunity, it also represents a challenge. There is generally challenge associated with opportunity. For although it is a fund, of $100 million that First Nations will decide priorities around, establishing priorities is tough. It is a difficult process but I am convinced that the goodwill that I have heard, the honesty, will lead to that matter and those challenges being overcome.

There are no ends of issues challenges, big and small but I want to leave you with this thought and this pledge.

For us, for the Premier, for the government of British Columbia, the work that your executive has been so instrumental in conducting thus far represents the hallmark of a new attempt to create the kind of relationship that will allow us to move forward together, cooperatively and ultimately see the lives of the people that we all represent, improved.

It is my great hope that this will represent the first of many such discussions that we can have that will allow us to meet and achieve that objective. Chief, again let me say to everyone gathered here, your executive, the Chiefs, the elders--what a great honour and privilege it has been for me to sit with you today.